

TO DIRECTOR OF  
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

National Intelligence Council

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NOTE FOR: DCI  
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FROM: Herbert E. Meyer  
VC/NIC

This article by Paul Johnson is  
quite powerful. I thought you might like to  
see it.

*HEM*  
Herbert E. Meyer

Attachment:  
Vietnam: The Vicious Legacy  
London Times, 4/20/85

Saigon fell 10 years ago this month. Paul Johnson reflects on the paralysing effect on US readiness to oppose Soviet expansionism — until Reagan —

# Vietnam: the vicious legacy

The fall of Saigon in 1975 and the decade that has followed illustrate a maxim endorsed by wise historians. It is willpower, rather than physical power, which determines the outcome of wars.

In analysing the 40-year tragedy of Indochina we must never forget that from 1945 onwards it was the determination of Ho Chi Minh, the communist leader, and his successors to dominate all of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, which was the principal dynamic of the struggle and the ultimate cause of all the bloodshed. They refused to allow their aim to be deflected in the smallest degree by the appalling casualties their subjects suffered or inflicted. The accusations of genocide hurled at the Americans thus have a bitter irony. It was the communists who never lost the will to rule, at any cost.

The Americans, by contrast, lacked a clear aim from the start, and lacking an aim how could they find the will to achieve it? Ho himself owed his initial position to the sponsorship of the American Office of Strategic Services (precursor of the CIA) during its anti-colonialist phase. Truman later reversed the policy and backed the French. But it was Eisenhower who committed America's original sin in Vietnam. When the French pulled out in 1954 and the country was partitioned, he acquiesced in the refusal of the South to submit to the electoral process. That in effect committed the US to sustaining the Saigon regime.

If Eisenhower had fought the Vietnam war the outcome would have been quite different. Being a military man, he knew that the key to success in war is to hit the enemy with overwhelming force and sustain it until he surrenders. The notion of fighting a war of restraint, with one eye on the headlines, was to him a contradiction in terms.

Unfortunately the active phase of the war was conducted by two civilians, Kennedy and Johnson.

who attempted to do precisely that. Kennedy committed US troops in tiny injections, which acted like a vaccine to immunize the Vietminh to the full impact of American power as it came.

Johnson did the same with US air power. The USAF told him it could get results only if the air offensive was heavy, swift, repeated endlessly and without restraint. With political restrictions, it promised nothing. Yet from start to finish, Johnson limited the bombing by restrictions which were entirely political. Every Tuesday he had a lunch conference at which he determined targets and bomb-weights.

Thus the bombing intensified very slowly, and the Vietminh had time to build shelters and adjust. When Russia sent defensive missiles, US bombers were not allowed to attack while the sites were under construction. In addition to target and bomb-weight limits, there were 16 "bombing pauses", none of which evoked the slightest response, and no less than 72 American "peace initiatives", all ignored.

In a media democracy such as America, to fight such a hesitant war was to invite dissension on the home front. It duly came, in 1966-67, when the East Coast media, hitherto enthusiastic supporters of US intervention, began to desert. In due course, the Seven Deadly Sins of the US media — the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, ABC, CBS and NBC — stuck at the will to continue, not so much by their editorializing as by their deeply pessimistic and critical reporting.

Vietnam was lost not on the ground, but in the media. The key episode was the communist Tet offensive on January 30, 1968. For the first time the communists conducted a major offensive in the open. Its object was to achieve complete tactical success and detonate a mass uprising. It failed in both: the Vietcong suffered heavy casualties.

## Majority supported the war, but the media said otherwise

But the American media, especially the TV networks, presented it as a decisive communist victory, the American equivalent of the disaster at Dien Bien Phu which led the French to pull out. An elaborate study by Peter Braestup, published in 1977, shows how the media's reversal of the truth (not deliberate, on the whole) came about.

The media similarly distorted the attitude of the American people to the war. The assertion, now a platitude, that there was a great swing away from the war in public opinion, above all among the young, is not true. Analysis of countless polls shows that support for withdrawal was never more than 20 per cent until after the November 1968 election, by which time the decision to pull out had already been taken.

Most Americans, in fact, had the right instincts: they wanted the war intensified, so that it could be won quickly. Support for this policy was always greater among under-35s than among older people. Young white males were the most consistent group backing escalation. Johnson's popularity ratings always rose when he piled on the military pressure: it leapt by 14 points when he started the bombing, then fell gradually as people realized he was not "bombing to kill".

Johnson's working-class Democrat supporters left him not because he was too tough but because they felt, rightly, he was not tough enough. He himself finally lost heart on March 12 1968 when his vote fell sharply in the New Hampshire presidential primary. He said he would not seek reelection but would spend the rest of his term making peace in Vietnam.

Careful analysis of the primary voting figures showed that, among anti-Johnson voters, the hawks outnumbered the doves by three to

two. But Johnson accepted the media's false interpretation of what the nation wanted. So it was not the American people who lost stomach for the fight; it was the American leadership.

Hence by the time Richard Nixon took over the presidency early in 1969 the decision to end the war in one way or another had effectively been taken. Over four difficult years, he negotiated skilfully with Hanoi, in the meantime transforming the geopolitics of the Far East by his new China policy. Although the US military force in Vietnam was steadily reduced, by the end of 1972 Nixon had succeeded in forcing Hanoi to accept two basic conditions. As Henry Kissinger has summarized them, "America would not end the war by overthrowing an allied government. Nor would it forgo the right to assist peoples that had fought valiantly at its side".

On January 27, 1973, the "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam", signed by both sides, reserved America's right to maintain aircraft carriers in Indochinese waters and to use aircraft stationed in Taiwan and Thailand if Hanoi broke the accords. So long as Nixon held office, would have been more than enough to ensure the independence of the South, as well as Laos and Cambodia.

But Nixon was soon swept from power by the media *putsch* known as Watergate. This episode can be seen either as one of those spasms of self-righteous moral hysteria to which America seems peculiarly prone or as a deliberate attempt to reverse the popular verdict of the 1972 election. It was a bit of both, probably. But for the men in Hanoi it was an uncovenanted stroke of fortune, and for the Soviet world generally it was the opportunity it had been waiting for since Truman, in 1945, began the process of resisting the advance of Communism all over the globe - a collapse of American will.

It was not just that Nixon, a powerful and wily president with a huge popular mandate, was replaced in the most difficult circumstances possible by the inexperienced Gerald Ford, who had not been elected at all. It was also that, temporarily at least, under the impact of anti-Vietnam feeling in Congress and still more Watergate, the balance of power had swung from the White House to Congress.

In 1973 the War Powers Resolution, passed over Nixon's veto, imposed unprecedented restraints on the power of the president to commit US forces abroad. Further limitations on presidential foreign policy were imposed by the Jackson-Vanik and Stevenson amendments of 1973-74. The CIA was virtually anaesthetized by Congress.

In 1974, Congress successfully prevented the president from taking active measures in Cyprus, and in 1975 in Angola. It passed the Arms Export Control Act, abolishing presidential discretion in arms supply. It used financial controls to limit "presidential agreements" (as opposed to treaties) with foreign powers, 6,300 of which had been

made in the 30 years 1946-74. No fewer than 33 congressional committees now supervised every aspect of the president's work in foreign and defence policy.

Against this background, there was little that Gerald Ford could do when the North Vietnamese broke the accords and launched a general invasion of the south. Twice, in January and March 1975, Ford made desperate appeals to Congress.

Congress did nothing. Saigon fell. Then came the real genocide. We shall never know how many of the people of South Vietnam were massacred. By 1977 a fifth of the population was in exile, 200,000 in political prisons. But the worst atrocities were committed in Cambodia by the communist Khmer Rouge, which entered the capital in mid-April, shortly before the fall of Saigon.

## Africa prime target in Moscow's new adventures abroad

Between April 1975 and the beginning of 1977, 100,000 Cambodians were executed, 20,000 died trying to flee, 400,000 in a forced exodus from the towns and 680,000 in prison camps and "villages" - a total of 1.2 million, a fifth of the population. That was the price Indochina had to pay so that America's Fourth Estate might enjoy unlimited licence.

America's humiliation, and the evident paralysis of its presidency encouraged the Soviet Union to make a series of forward moves of a kind it had not attempted since Stalin's day (with the one exception of the abortive Cuban venture in 1962). Africa was the prime target, with the ultimate object of replacing the white regime in South Africa with a black Marxist one, thus giving Russia naval predominance in the southern oceans and control over the largest and most varied deposits of minerals in the world, after its own.

In December 1975, eight months after the Saigon collapse, the first Cuban troops, under Soviet naval escort, landed in Angola. The next year they moved into Ethiopia and into Central and East Africa. By the end of the 1970s there were ten Marxist African states, some with Cuban garrisons, providing Russia with diplomatic and propaganda support, economic access and military bases.

The second half of the 1970s, marked by growing economic crisis in the West and a falling US dollar, were distinguished by American paralysis or retreat all over the world, and by the unremitting advance by Russia and its surrogates. At the beginning of 1979, deserted by Washington, the Shah of Iran - America's most important ally in western Asia and the Gulf - abandoned his throne to a fiercely anti-western theocratic dictatorship which immediately plunged America into fresh humiliations.

But by another of those paradoxes in which history is so rich, the seizure of power by Shi'ite extremists in Iran set in motion a chain of events which reversed the whole geopolitical drift of the 1970s. For the Ayatollah's holy war rang alarm bells in the Kremlin, increasingly suspicious of its 50 million Muslim subjects with their spectacularly high birthrate.

In December 1979, irritated by internal events in Afghanistan - a potential source of Muslim fundamentalist unrest right on its borders - and assuming without question that the West would no longer react, Russia invaded and occupied the country, nominally at the request of one of its political factions.

That was the turning point. The West did react. Above all, America reacted. The paralysed giant came back to life. Within a year the American people, by an overwhelming majority, had elected a strong president with a clear mandate to reassert the powers of the presidency, restore the arms balance and give America and the West a vigorous leadership all over the world.

Ronald Reagan has certainly done what the electors asked. In the process he has done two further things which seemed scarcely possible when he began his election campaign in the spring of 1980. First, he has presided over a formidable revival of the American economy which has created 10 million new jobs, recovered US supremacy in a range of advanced technologies and revalued the dollar.

All this has led, secondly, to a restoration of American morale and self-confidence. Ordinary Americans have rediscovered pride in their country, together with the will to defend its interests.

In turn, Reagan's first four and a half years have forced Russia into an uncomfortable reappraisal of its policies. The end of the 1970s found it overstretched, once it was clear that Afghanistan would be a heavy military and financial commitment for many years. Immediately Reagan began to raise US defence spending Moscow was forced to look around for savings in order to give itself financial room to respond to the challenge.

The choice fell on southern Africa. Moscow is no longer prepared to pay the Cuban bill, and its forces are being slowly extricated. South Africa is thus able to make peace with its neighbours and engage in a process of internal reform. Indeed, Moscow has downgraded Africa as a whole in its schemes.

Thus a great part of the damage to the West which followed the fall of Saigon has been repaired. But its destructive consequences are still with us. The triumph of communist North Vietnam brought into existence one of the fiercest and most militaristic states the world has ever known. Vietnam has become an Asian Prussia, with 1,200,000 men under arms, more per capita than any other country.

These forces are a threat not merely to near neighbours such as Thailand and Malaysia but to non-communist regimes throughout a vast new arc of tension, spreading through south and south-east Asia deep into the Indian and Pacific oceans. In this immense sector of the world, hitherto almost untroubled by Soviet geopolitics, Moscow can set in motion difficulties for the West at little or no cost to itself. The Soviet ocean-going naval and fishing fleets, with Vietnam

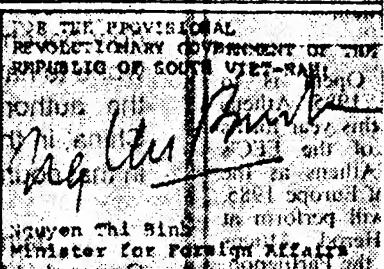
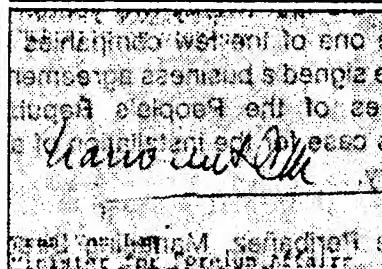
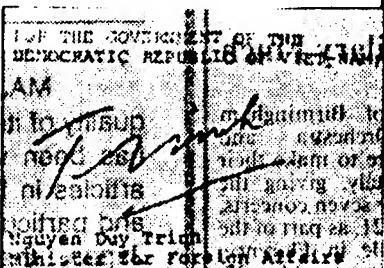
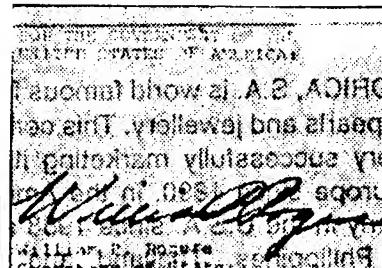
land-forces as potential assistants, are the physical means by which these difficulties can be exploited.

One opportunity presents itself in Sri Lanka. There is another in New Caledonia, where the French have made an almighty hash of things (as they did in Indochina). There is trouble with Mauritius, now negotiating with Moscow. The Vietnamese are showing an active interest in Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides). The Russians themselves are negotiating "fishing rights" with Kiribati (formerly the Ellice Islands); and where the Soviet trawlers come their nuclear submarines are rarely far behind.

At this delicate moment, the New Zealanders - who after all have far more to lose than we have - have chosen to put in power a comic Methodist lay-preacher whose first major act has been to destroy the Anzus Treaty.

Hence, while the psychosis induced by the fall of Saigon has been largely exorcised the physical legacy remains. In the early 1970s we allowed to emerge in south-east Asia a political and military Frankenstein influenced from afar by its Soviet progenitors. We must bolt all the doors in the region that we can.

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January 27, 1973: the four-party agreement ending the war. Then came Watergate - and the communist onslaught



April 29, 1975: as the communists close in, foreign nationals flee Saigon by US naval helicopter.